

## Reflection for 13 February 2022 by Ben Gray

### Contemporary Reading

*At the heart of the Māori world is Papatūānuku, the primordial mother earth deity. Above is Ranginui, the primordial father sky deity. Their many children are guardians of various domains, including Tangaroa, god of the sea, Tāwhirimātea, god of winds, Haumiatiketike, god of wild foods, and Rongomātāne, god of cultivated food, especially kūmara, hence 'god of peace'.*

*Tūmatauenga is god of war, but the most important brother for humans is Tānemahuta (also known as Tāne, or sometimes Tāne-nui-a-Rangi), ancestor of mankind and all the trees, birds, insects and other land animals and plants. It was Tāne who managed to separate their parents in the first place, to end their millennia-long tight embrace, with all their children crouched in the dark between them, and allow the light of day to enter the world. Tāne planted the trees of the forest, and filled them with the birds and other living things. Tāne cloaked his father Ranginui with the night sky, adorned it with the stars, and begat humanity with Hineahuone, the primordial female ancestor god, whom he fashioned from clay. Tāne ascended to the heavens and returned with the three baskets of knowledge for humankind. The rain is likened to the tears of love from Rangi to Papa, and the mists her sorrowful sighs in return. The youngest unborn brother is Rūaumoko, god of earthquakes and volcanoes. When he moves inside his mother's belly, the earth shakes and rumbles: perhaps in the twenty-first century his time draws near?[1]p*

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### The Stories We Live By

Yuval Harari in his book *Sapiens* argued that the thing that distinguished humans from the other apes was language and the

ability to tell stories. He noted that the largest bands of chimpanzees are no bigger than around 150, the sort of number where every member can have a relationship with all the others. He argued that humans developed stories that enabled them to live together in larger numbers and that these stories fell into three categories;

1. Stories about the world around...there is a tree in the meadow with apples. This aligns with what we know from scientific study or Mātauranga Māori.
2. Stories that enable us to live together, that only work if everyone believes them...money is a good example, a banknote is only of value because everyone else agrees that it is and moreover agrees how much it is worth.
3. Stories about what is right behaviour.

MacGregor in his book “Living with the Gods” develops this idea and quoting Durkheim asserts that; “The stories are the society” and that “ If...we lose or forget them, in a very real way we, collectively, no longer exist” [23] (p. xii).

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The different stories of different cultures are what distinguishes one culture from another.

*a dynamic system of rules—explicit and implicit—  
established by groups to ensure survival,*

*involving attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, behaviours,  
shared by a group, but harboured differently by each  
[individual] within the group*

*communicated across generations, relatively stable but  
with the potential to change across time*

Any individual is a member of many “cultures” I am a New Zealander, but also English, I think of myself as of the Pacific and of the World. I

am a doctor, I am heterosexual man, and I am a progressive Presbyterian.

In times of crisis we need to examine our stories to see if they remain fit or whether we need some new stories.

For Christians the stories and rules are explicit in the sense that they are written down in the Bible. This has enabled the development of a world culture of Christians who literally all read from the same book, in a way that would have been very difficult to develop without the Bible.

Lloyd Geering[2](p15) discussed how the Bible is broadly divided between four different streams:

1. The Torah consisting of legendary stories and tribal sagas
2. The Royalist Davidic stream Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings
3. The prophetic stream Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel
4. The Wisdom stream Proverbs Psalms Job Ecclesiasticus and Ecclesiastes

He argued that the first stream was predominant in Judaism, the second in Christianity and the third in Islam and that the Wisdom stream has been relatively neglected.

The Wisdom stream has been relatively neglected but it has much promise. It is more concerned with this world and reflected on daily life. As Lloyd said:

*When we compare the Wisdom books with the other three streams the first thing that strikes us is the almost complete absence of such great themes as the destiny of Israel as a people. They were more concerned with the daily life of the human individual and were not interested in Israelites alone but in all humans. The stream contains no reference to Israel as a chosen*

*people and no hint of ethnic or racial superiority.  
[2](p17-18)*

After the second world war “we” formally decided that in order to try to avoid future world wars that we needed the United Nations; a forum for developing stories that were shared by the world community, to develop a world culture. The International Declaration of Human Rights and in particular that all people were of equal value, was one of the first important agreements to be reached as a direct response to the horrors of the holocaust. Whilst the Germans were seen as the villains in fact all of the “White” Christian nations had previously lived by a story that declared that coloured people were inferior savages who needed to be civilised and/or exterminated. That story of equal value has slowly been adopted by cultures and peoples around the world and is behind the increased focus on rights for women, LBGTQI and indigenous minorities.

The stories we have inherited that preference “our people” (the Israelites) over others are problematic.

Our reading today is from Jeremiah who is from the prophetic stream. In trying to understand these stories it is important to know the context in which they were made.

Jeremiah lived at a time when the Assyrian empire was declining, and the Babylonians were on the ascendancy. He warned Israel of the consequences of breaking the covenant with God through their idolatry and injustice, particularly of Israel’s leaders who were corrupt, and predicted that Babylon would come as God’s servant to destroy Jerusalem and take the people into exile. This all came to pass during his life. He also gave a message of hope that after the destruction there would be planting and rebuilding.

The reading today curses the man who trusts in man and turns away from the Lord and compares him to a shrub planted in the desert

who shall not see any good coming. Those who trust in the Lord are like a tree planted by water with roots in the stream that is resilient.

This story was written at a time of crisis, does it have any lessons for us in our current time of crisis?

I found a traditional interpretation of the Jeremiah story that suggested that if we all abandoned extramarital sex and returned to family values then this would address the current crisis in the USA. Stories can be interpreted in many ways. We could interpret today's reading to be that we need to pay attention to our connection with the earth and that if we do not, we shall not see any good. You could even suggest that "the Lord" is Gaia the planet and that our heart has turned away from the planet. The overall message from Jeremiah that despite the coming crisis there will be hope is also helpful, for without hope we risk despondency.

The central problem with prophecy is that by claiming it is the word of God, it is therefore right, irrespective of time and circumstance. It is hard to change the story according to our needs. A good example of this is Genesis.

Genesis 28 is particularly problematic

*And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.*

It provided the justification for the decimation of the environment. In combination with the European Christian view on "savages" is responsible for the profound effects of colonisation.

Our Christian based culture has come to view anything other than humans as resources to be exploited and subdued.

The sages of the Wisdom stream felt free to borrow from their counterparts in other cultures especially Egyptian and Mesopotamian. The Wisdom stream was very cosmopolitan; today we would say it was ecumenical or global in its outreach.

If we follow that tradition, then we should include Wisdom from other cultures.

Where Genesis had humankind dominating nature, the Māori creation story has humankind related to all the trees birds insects and other land animals. Central to Māori philosophy is the importance of Whakapapa.

*Whakapapa both explains the world and guides human behaviour in the world. Whakapapa and the genealogical model of the universe provide a theoretical underpinning of the Māori values, based on ethical concepts of ecology and community. Whakapapa is how Māori people introduce themselves to each other and how they understand other people – a major topic of Māori conversation. [1](p58-59)*

A good example of adopting some Māori values is New Zealand's handling of the pandemic. Some of our success can be attributed to preferencing Māori concepts; Manaakitanga (kindness) and Kotahitanga (the team of 5 million). Whilst these are not solely Māori concepts they were included in our Pandemic Ethics guiding document as a result of Māori consultation. These ideas were central to the New Zealand response and largely absent from the responses of many other countries.

We are faced with unprecedented challenges. The pandemic is bad enough but we must address climate change. Refugee movement will get worse as the climate changes. Despite United Nations efforts

we still struggle with warfare and nuclear weapons continue to plague the planet. Our economic system is not fit for purpose. These are all problems that will only be able to be solved by developing shared World stories. The development of the Climate Change story is a really good example. To be effective these stories, like the story about human rights, need to be developed and adopted in our national and local cultures.

It is the stories of “Western” culture that have brought us to this worrying place. There are two important processes we can engage in.

The first is to critically evaluate our own stories, emphasise the good and discard the not so good. St Andrew’s has been working on this challenge for many years.

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St Andrews has a good foundation on which to build with our statement on progressive Christianity:

- We Offer hospitality through people-focused activities and buildings with a welcoming ethos
- We are a place for lively exploration of the significance of Christian tradition for how we live our lives and connect with the Sacred today
- We create a space for God talk (recognising people hear that and understand it in different ways) and for non-theistic expression, with liturgy and hymns that reflect our context and understandings
- We act as a community that acknowledges Te Tiriti o Waitangi as our country’s founding document and engages in living out what being bicultural means for us today
- We honour the wonders of the natural environment and nurture the care of Earth

- We encourage questioning and value what we can learn from science
- We focus on the teachings of Jesus as they relate to 21st century challenges: climate change, human rights, inequality, poverty, violence and war, greed, injustice, and pandemic.
- We are a church without labels, welcoming of all people An inclusive church, including people of any creed, race, class or sexual orientation. A church where lay participation in worship is fostered and no talents are wasted A church which seeks to give a Christian shape to social, economic and political affairs – to be light, salt and leaven.

The second is to develop a new foundation to replace the individualistic, competitive, exploitative ethos that has grown out of the Western tradition. Aotearoa/New Zealand has the opportunity of developing a significantly different foundation building upon the indigenous world views of Aotearoa/New Zealand and other Pacific nations and building stories to live by that can heal our world.

[Slide Change](#)

Kia kaha

Kia manawanui

He waka eke noa

1. Stewart, G.T., *Maori philosophy : indigenous thinking from Aotearoa*. 2020, London

New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

2. Geering, L., *Such is life! : a close encounter with Ecclesiastes*. 2010, Wellington, N.Z.: Steele Roberts Pub.